Boundary work: American ethnographers as intercultural communicators in Japan

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Abstract

An intriguing window on Japanese/American intercultural relations can be found in American ethnographers’ in-depth accounts of their difficulties with Japanese informants. Although the literature contains excellent self-analyses of this kind, this body of data has yet to be mined for general lessons regarding communication between Americans and Japanese. This paper addresses that gap by comparing several reflexive accounts of doing ethnography in Japan: Matthews Hamabata’s Crested Kimono, Gail Bernstein’s Haruko’s World, Liza Dalby’s Geisha, and Crafting Selves by Dorinne Kondo. Examining the barriers to Japanese/American communication through this special lens reveals a complicated picture. On the one hand, familiar factors, such as the universalism of Americans, their emphasis upon individual autonomy in social relations, and the Japanese matrix of constantly shifting in-group/out-group relations are often the dominant influences on intercultural interactions. Yet, on the other hand, situational contexts and the value orientations and political commitments of the actors clearly do modify the expression of such factors and sometimes even reverse the expected outcomes. The present approach facilitates the representation of these complex relationships. A qualitative analysis in which an objectively framed comparison aimed at generalization rests upon the non-refied foundation of several reflexive ethnographies, shows promise as one strategy for transcending the stalemate between traditional group-based interpretations of culture and more recent approaches stressing individual agency and internal cultural diversity. This paper also illustrates some advantages of an anthropological approach to communication between the members of two cultures whose differences have long been a focus of interculturalist research and examines implications for models of collectivist and individualist cultures. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Intercultural; Communication; Japanese; Americans; Ethnography; Anthropology

One major untapped resource for analyzing the difficulties of Japanese/western intercultural interactions can be found in foreign ethnographers’ discussions of the
challenges that they faced in communicating with Japanese informants. Over the years both anthropologists (Bernstein, 1983; Dalby, 1983; Hendry, 1992, 1999; Kondo, 1990; Moeran, 1985, 1990; Rohlen, 1973, 1974, p. 255–259; Tsuda, 1998) and others employing anthropological methodologies (Hamabata, 1990) have produced fascinating accounts of their fieldwork encounters. While these range from objectively phrased discussions of fieldwork setting and research strategy to highly revealing accounts of the researchers’ emotional dilemmas, such fieldwork stories constitute a unique data set and a powerful lens through which to contemplate Japanese relations with outsiders. By focusing upon the problems that even these expert cultural interpreters experienced, we should be able to see more deeply into some of the differences that divide Japanese from others. Furthermore, since the ethnographers have already labored to identify what went right and wrong in their projects, we possess excellent resources for an analysis of this kind. In this context, a comparison of ethnographic encounters promises to provide the basis for a particularly anthropological contribution to the literature on intercultural relations involving the Japanese. By relying upon both in-depth ethnographic data and an analytical approach informed by recent debates in anthropological theory, this paper attempts to respond to the need for more complex and realistic models of intercultural communication (Landis & Wasilewski, 1999, pp. 547–553). It will hopefully also serve as one step towards reestablishing a more substantive role for anthropology in intercultural communication studies. It is regrettable that, despite the pioneering work of Hall (1959, 1976), occasional forays by individual anthropologists (Agar, 1994; Gmelch, 1992, 1997), and a seemingly unlimited potential contribution, cultural anthropology is presently having very little influence on intercultural communication research (Hart, 1999; Roth & Roth, 1999).

There are of course both advantages and disadvantages to a comparison of ethnographer narratives. On the negative note, the researcher stories are admittedly limited to outsider/Japanese interactions in the rather specialized context of ethnographic fieldwork. Some would also view an analysis like this as a travesty on imaginative ethnographic accounts that were never meant as grist for the comparativist’s mill. Counterbalancing these concerns, however, is the fact that the ultimate test of a comparison lies in the insights that it provides. From this perspective, it seems promising that the fieldwork narratives offer up the condensed insights of a set of observers exceptionally qualified to cut through the usual confusion of Japanese/western intercultural relations. Not only does anthropological training produce individuals uniquely sensitized to the subtleties of intercultural understanding but anthropologists typically address these issues based upon intimate long-term involvement in the situations that they describe. We might thus expect some of the most penetrating interpretations of Japanese intercultural relations from ethnographers writing about their own in-depth field experiences. The ethnographers have not disappointed us as, over the years, they have produced rich descriptions of their relations with informants in diverse situations, ranging from households, small towns, and rural communities (Ashkenazi, 1997; Bernstein, 1983; Moeran, 1985); to friendships in urban settings (Hendry, 1992, 1999); to businesses (Kondo, 1990; Hamabata, 1986, 1990; Rohlen, 1974); to more specialized contexts such as bars and
geisha teahouses (Allison, 1994; Dalby, 1983), the art world (Moeran, 1990), and factories employing foreign workers (Tsuda, 1998). Indeed, such texts represent a naturally occurring version of the informant diaries that Cupach and Imahori (1993) have called for as a key research priority: semi-structured accounts kept by “members of developing intercultural relationships” whose content “could be mined to discern how an emerging relational identity is manifested in everyday interactions” (p. 130) (see also Bond, 1997, pp. xii–xvi).

What is missing, however, is any effort to use comparison to take stock of the many lessons that these case studies can teach. Instead, the fieldwork stories simply stand alone as intriguing introductions to monographs or experiments in ethnographic writing. The objective of this paper is to help remedy this situation. In it I carry out a comparison of four narratives that American ethnographers have produced. Following in one major tradition of anthropological and sociological research (Ragin, 1987, pp. 34–52), I am using case-oriented qualitative comparison to explore the insights that may result from work with a neglected part of the intercultural literature. Hopefully, the analysis will sharpen our grasp of some of the complexities and ambiguities underlying familiar frameworks—such as the distinction between individualism and collectivism—through which Japanese/ American differences are often approached. Such an in-depth qualitative sorting of the issues should provide a useful reference point for those seeking to refine the categories used in survey research.

The decision to restrict consideration to four particular fieldwork encounters has also been carefully considered. Most importantly, this reflects an inherent limitation of the case-oriented comparative method. As Ragin (1987, pp. 49–52) has noted, since in this approach cases are examined as wholes rather than as collections of variables, comparison becomes increasingly unwieldy when a set of more than two to four cases is considered. In addition, by using only monograph-length studies in which the ethnographer/informant relationship is a major focus and holding researcher nationality constant, I attempt to maximize the comparability of the material. Although a survey of the literature revealed a number of texts in which Western anthropologists had described their relationships with Japanese, the others were not as reflexive, multifaceted, and detailed as the four used here. In particular, they did not examine all aspects of relations between ethnographers and informants over lengthy periods during which the researchers adjusted to overall community life. Finally, works by ethnographers other than US Americans were not included so as to avoid exponentially increasing the number of cultural differences to be considered, thereby rendering a case-oriented comparison unmanageable (Ragin, 1987, pp. 49–51).

It must be stressed that the goal of this study is not to reproduce the rich array of data contained in the various field worker accounts nor yet to analyze these texts as examples of the ethnographic narrative. Rather, focusing particularly on the initial phase of each fieldwork encounter, I will use the four accounts to clarify the barriers to communication that the ethnographers faced and to discover what techniques, strategies, and/or circumstances proved decisive in their overcoming these obstacles. If such critical factors can be isolated through a brief analysis of each fieldwork
narrative, this should in turn lay the foundation for a comparison of the four cases that will illuminate the processes of Japanese/American intercultural interaction more generally. The ultimate goal is to learn what the ethnographic encounters can reveal about the fundamental difficulties that Americans face in living, communicating, and working with Japanese.

In the most specific terms, three areas will be explored in the following paper:

(1) Does an examination of the fieldwork encounters help us to identify any common issues that are apt to impede Japanese/American intercultural communication?
(2) Can we, from a comparison of the sort undertaken here, obtain a better grasp of the range and variety of communication problems that one may expect? And,
(3) Does this type of analysis sharpen our sense of how the prospects for success in intercultural communication may vary according to the situational context, the basic objectives of interaction, and the attributes of the parties themselves?

As the diversity of these questions illustrates, while this study does aim at generalizations on Japanese/American intercultural relations, it is not reasserting a simplistic version of the “group model” (Moyer & Sugimoto, 1986) for understanding matters Japanese. Rather, I wish to explore one hitherto unutilized option for linking individual agency with culture. By comparing, in objectively framed fashion, several reflexive accounts of Japanese/American interactions within partially similar settings, I seek to illuminate not only cultural contrasts between Japanese and Americans but also commonalities and differences in the behavior of persons within both cultures. Using such an approach may help rebut the position of some disciplinary scholars that analyzing human relationships under rubrics such as “culture” and “intercultural communication” necessarily involves essentialism or reification. While it is important to resist falsely globalizing images of Japanese and American culture, we also urgently need to develop analytical frames that can more accurately depict the subtle combinations of shared cultural orientations and divergent concepts and motivations that characterize most real-life situations. Although both Japan specialists (Ashkenazi, 1997; Bernstein, 1983; Hendry, 1992; Kondo, 1990; Moeran, 1990; Tsuda, 1998) and anthropologists focused elsewhere (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Devita, 1992; Fowler & Hardesty, 1994; Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988) have produced substantial literatures that use fieldwork encounters to explore the uncertainty of knowing, the negotiated nature of social identities, and the objectification of the other, we must still struggle to identify non-reified ways of representing the effects of culturally shared features upon such intercultural relations (Hastrup & Hervik, 1994; Ortner, 1999; Roth & Roth, 1999, p. 210). In analyzing such relations through a small-scale qualitative comparison, this paper represents one anthropologist’s attempt to address issues that have also stimulated recent efforts by interculturalists to refine identity management theory (Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Ting-Toomey, 1993). Both initiatives are alike in seeking more complex yet precise ways of modeling actual processes of intercultural relations.
1. Crested Kimono: from seeking generalized affinity to selective in-group relations

Though conducted by a sociologist, Matthews Hamabata’s 1990 study Crested Kimono (fieldwork in 1979–80) employed a methodology indistinguishable from anthropological ethnography. In both this book and a 1986 article, Hamabata examines the everyday lives of the women and youth affiliated with several doozoku gaisha (elite family controlled businesses). Specifically, the study focuses on two tasks: (1) analyzing Hamabata’s own struggles to move beyond his initial misperceptions of Japanese culture and become an effective researcher, and (2) illustrating, through several case histories, the issues faced by members of the doozoku gaisha as they choose spouses, plan out careers, struggle for succession to family headships, and participate in ancestral rites and funerals. Through recounting such events, Hamabata documents both the dynamics of some leading commercial families and the interdependence of the business and kinship spheres.

Hamabata’s study conveys how difficult it can be for even a researcher with training at a top university, excellent contacts, and a sense of affinity deriving from his Japanese-American background to establish smooth working relations with Japanese. At first, seeking to investigate the elite family enterprises as businesses, Hamabata relied upon introductions from the wife of an American diplomat, the mother of a boy who had been his friend during a prior visit to Japan (1990, pp. 2–5). Although this led to more contacts and interviews, Hamabata still occupied a marginal niche. In his own words:

I started out by trying to interview presidents of manufacturing concerns, the heads of various doozoku gaisha. I was taken on a round of expensive dinners and luncheons: it was a polite and effective way of putting me off. Whenever I did get an hour or two for interviews, I would find the information on organizational behavior or structure within the respective firms to be of interest, but nothing new was being offered. Everything sounded much too familiar, and I began to wonder why I had traveled all the way to Tokyo only to hear what could be read in documents available at almost any American university. (1990, p. 4)

[My first six months in the field] was, to borrow from Clifford Geertz, my period of ghosthood. As a nonperson, as a specter of sorts, I was often treated with deep suspicion in the guise of absolute indifference. (1990, pp. 5–6)

Hamabata’s dilemma may have a familiar ring to those who have attempted ethnography in Japan. It provides an archetypal image of the outsider, unaware of the many structural differentiations within a highly bounded system, seeking to initiate meaningful communication with its occupants through a frontal assault, predicated upon expressions of common interest and mutual good will.

From such a start, how did Hamabata manage to establish the rapport necessary for successful research? His own account identifies some of the critical steps in a painful process of trial-and-error learning (1986, pp. 356–361, 1990, pp. 4–24). In part the difficulties resulted from Hamabata’s presenting himself as an insider to any and all informants, based upon his shared ancestry as a Japanese-American (1986,
pp. 356, 368–369n). Though logical, this approach typically backfired as gaps in his linguistic and cultural performance caused informants to view him as an inadequately socialized Japanese. When he posed as an English-speaking American, by contrast, his behavioral lapses were often excused, and he received credit for effort if he occasionally communicated in Japanese (1990, pp. 8–9, 12–14).

At first, Hamabata also blundered by inappropriately disclosing personal information and feelings. Since, as an American, he was prone to place informality above conventional expressions of sentiment and to value the open sharing of feelings, Hamabata sometimes paid insufficient attention to proper ritual form or lapsed into embarrassing self-revelations (1990, pp. 9–10). His informants, by contrast, relied upon a more balanced dualistic framework according to which they valued both *tatemae* (“proper outward forms of behavior”) and *honme* (“inner feelings”) but saw limiting each of these to appropriate situations as a key indicator of maturity and good breeding (1990, pp. 10–11, 50–51, 134–136). They also distinguished carefully between situations, based upon the degree to which one should emphasize *giri* (“social obligation”) or *ninjō* (“human feeling”) (1990, pp. 18–24, 46, 49–51). As Hamabata learned to exercise self-restraint in contexts calling for *tatemae* or *giri* and to restrict his sharing of *honme* and *ninjō* to more clearly in-group settings, his acceptance improved markedly (1990, pp. 10–11, 17, 22–24, 48–51, 137–138).

With limited knowledge of how Japanese cultivated social relations through gifts, Hamabata (1990, pp. 21–24) also misinterpreted the significance of material exchanges early in his fieldwork. For example, he once leaped to anger upon receiving a large cash present from a family whose daughter he had advised about study in the US. To Hamabata the gift seemed a blatant rejection of the generous and disinterested spirit in which he had offered help. From a Japanese perspective, however, the money was viewed as just a useful medium for calculating the levels of mutual obligation and esteem. Fortunately, Hamabata, managed to quell his outrage and use the opportunity to learn more about the culturally distinct Japanese expectations regarding gift exchange (1990, pp. 22–25).

Finally, Hamabata made breakthroughs by focusing on more accessible categories of informants and reconceptualizing his research problem in more culturally appropriate terms once he found productive interviewing of company leaders blocked by his own youth and low status (1990, pp. 4–5, 28n, 164n). Given the importance of age and rank, both of which can be expressed as *ue/shita* or “high/low” relations in Japanese, busy corporate officers were generally reluctant to spend time providing information to a young researcher. In addition, in a society in which the *uchi/soto* (“in-group/out-group”) distinction was fundamental, there was little motivation for the executives to share confidences with an outsider. However, a possible opening appeared when Hamabata began to notice the powerful impact of domestic relations and female kinship networks upon the operations of the *doozoku*

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1 I have replaced Hamabata’s terms “*uchi/otaku*” (lit. “our humble house/your honorable home”) with the more common phrase “*uchi/soto*” to standardize the terminology here. See Bachrak and Quinn (1994) on the centrality of the *uchi/soto* distinction to individual identity and the social order in Japan.
gaisha (1990, pp. 27–31). For example, women born to elite banking families sometimes assisted their husbands’ enterprises in obtaining critical loans (1990, pp. 28–29), and women also intervened in disputes about the succession to company headship and guided the careers and marriages of offspring destined to join in the family businesses (1990, pp. 41–46, 62–70, 111–116, 124–141). Witnessing such processes bought home to Hamabata that ceasing to treat business as a wholly separate male and public domain would allow him to investigate other important aspects of the overall system of doozoku gaisha. As he put it: “With the change in perspective, the research problem became: How might the internal structure and dynamics of the household influence the realm of the economy” (1990, p. 30). Hamabata’s new approach clearly gave him a more culturally congruent means of studying something significantly related to his original target of the elite, family controlled enterprises: At a blow it reduced the problem of the status and age gap and directed the researcher towards a new domain where a “foreign student” could more easily fit in. Given such an identity, Hamabata was free to interact casually with both the youth of the doozoku gaisha and their mothers. A reformulation of objectives thus put Hamabata in a position to obtain the copious case material regarding marital, career, and succession choices that so enriches his book.

Still, problems remained. Even before turning to his new strategy, Hamabata had wrestled with the fact that his maleness complicated communication with female informants (1990, pp. 14–16). While mothers in the elite business families preoccupied themselves with finding him a spouse, their daughters were inhibited before an eligible bachelor. Although Hamabata had reduced such gender interference somewhat by grooming himself to a role that legitimated close contact with women—the overtly asexual identity of an immature student—this ironically meant that he lost even more ground with the male executives (1990, pp. 16–17, 28). As he explains:

Because I was not considered a mature adult, a real man as it were, by adult Japanese males, I was left in the company of women, who treated me as either a son or a younger brother. This left me open to ridicule by males, culminating in their ostracism. As a result, my research began to focus, more and more, on the lives of the women. (1990, p. 164n)

Such isolation from men seems to have been a tradeoff of doing any meaningful research in this situation.

The foregoing hopefully does some justice to Hamabata’s rich analysis of his fieldwork predicament. But are additional insights available from reflecting on the encounter overall? One theme that pervades the conflicts reported by Hamabata is that of fundamentally contrasting approaches to the classification and evaluation of social relationships. As many episodes make clear, Hamabata’s informants organized their relations with others by employing a series of contrastive binary categories that, while conceptually precise, were applied in a highly flexible and relativistic fashion. Distinctions such as uchi/soto (“in-group” versus “out-group”), homme/tatemae (“inner feeling” versus “proper outward expression”), ie/shita (“high ranking” versus “low”), and ninjoo/giri (“human feeling” versus “social obligation”)
played an indispensable role in orienting the actors to each new situation (1990, pp. 10–11, 22–24, 48–51, 160–162). Hamabata’s American inclinations contrasted with this Japanese system for managing human relations, since he tended to approach new people and situations by employing universal social and moral categories on the one hand and evaluations derived from spontaneous individual feelings on the other. Thus, rather than orienting himself to the field situation through *uchisato* and the other dualistic parameters that a Japanese would employ, Hamabata seemed locked into viewing *ethnicity* in an abstract sense (e.g., Japanese versus Americaness and Japanese-Americaness) as the most salient criterion of social identity (1986, pp. 368–369n, 1990, pp. 6–8). He was likewise preoccupied with how to connect with the male *dozoku* *gaisha* leaders as a social category (1990, pp. 4–5). Finally, he tended to evaluate behavior on the basis of abstract values such as honesty, openness, and directness rather than its contextual appropriateness (1990, pp. 9–10). With such differences in his approach to social classification, Hamabata was in effect culturally programmed to overlap social boundaries that the Japanese treated as categorically distinct. To just the degree that he valued relating to informants in broad, non-discriminating, and emotionally open ways, they seemed compelled to organize their lives by deploying myriad social boundaries and closely regulating the flow of information and feelings across them.

Such contrasts in relational styles are of course reflections of the fundamental differences between individualist and collectivist cultural orientations (Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Ting-Toomey, 1993, p. 78) as well as between universalism and particularism (Smith & Bond, 1998, pp. 62–64).

Coming to understand such differences in culturally operative frameworks was obviously critical to Hamabata’s success. However, the account of his difficulties makes it clear that in situations of this sort mere cognitive comprehension is rarely sufficient. It seems unlikely that a doctoral researcher from a leading university would have been completely unfamiliar with concepts such as *uchि*, *tatemaе*, *giri*, and *ninjo* that fill the professional literature on Japan (Befu, 1971; Doi, 1973; Lebra, 1976; Nakane, 1970) or indeed with the notion that in-group relations are critical there. Yet for a long while Hamabata neglected using these indigenous principles to resolve his own predicament. The likely sticking point was the difficulty of applying such alien ways of thinking and feeling to a situation in which he was personally and

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2In stressing that Hamabata’s focus on *ethnicity* posed a problem to his fieldwork, I am not suggesting that it was irrelevant to his informants, for others have documented strong racial consciousness among the Japanese (Bernstein, 1983, pp. 31–32; Dower, 1986, pp. 203–296; Okimoto, 1971, pp. 174–183). Moreover, race and ethnic identity do become criteria for exclusion in Japan (Sugimoto, 1997, pp. 169–192). However, this does not mean that most Japanese would, like Hamabata, view common racial heritage (as opposed, say, to sharing an *uchи* tie at the small-group level) as a *sufficient* justification for active bonding and cooperation. As Hamabata discovered, common ancestry alone could not provide a basis for the inclusion and research collaboration that he sought.

3While this analysis of Hamabata’s initial stance as an ethnographer does underscore the strong tendency toward universalistic versus particularistic orientations in Americans and Japanese, it must be stressed that in practice the members of both societies operate with subtle blends of universalistic and particularistic thinking (Befu, 1971, pp. 166–170; Dore, 1958, pp. 378–381; Reischauer, 1977, pp. 138–145).
professionally invested. In retrospect, the solutions to Hamabata’s dilemmas were simple in principle, once viewed from a Japanese perspective. He was able to establish good relations with informants as soon as he targeted more accessible categories of persons. Furthermore, he came to see that a critical step for any outsider seeking to communicate with Japanese is to begin by sorting his social relationships in terms of the *uchi/soto* distinction and its various situational permutations (1990, p. 49). Once this has been initiated, one can continue to adjust his behavior in terms of other important concepts such as *home/tatemae, ue/shita*, and *ninjō/giri*, along with the unwritten rules of gift exchange.

Yet, as Hamabata’s story also illustrates, the shift from universalistic values and social categories to an *uchi/soto* style of thinking will for many Americans involve a wrenching personal transformation. The inherent difficulty of such a change is underscored by the unease that Hamabata (1986, p. 368, 1990, p. 25) expresses about the lingering power of the emotionally alien identity that he had embraced in order to survive in the field. Although his research seems to have gone smoothly once Hamabata accepted his new juvenile identity, he never ceased to be threatened by his informants’ expectations that he return to this pose in subsequent encounters. As he wrote in *Crested Kimono*:

Today, however, the person that I became in the field exists only as a shadow. I barely know him. And yet, he overwhelms me whenever I return to Tokyo. He even dares to accompany my informants on their frequent visits to the United States, informants who now say to me, “Matto wa motto ii hito datta, ne?” (Matto used to be a better person, don’t you think?). He inspires such commentary. In a sense, “Matto” judges me. He criticizes me for being too American, too selfish, too vulgar, for not being chaste enough. In fact, “Matto” has crossed a sacred ethnographic boundary by refusing to remain in the field, where he belongs. (p. 25)

Such haunting reactions convey the costs to a young American who had, given his research focus, had little choice but to accommodate to a dependent role within an uncompromising Japanese system. They likewise underscore the profound nature of shifting from an individualist to a collectivist mode of social relations.

2. *Haruko’s World*: entering the farm family and community

In her engaging 1983 study *Haruko’s World* (fieldwork of 6 months in 1974–75 with brief revisits in 1982 and 1993), Gail Bernstein sought to portray the situation of a Japanese farm wife from an insider’s perspective. She not only conveys the complexity and difficulty of the woman Haruko’s role, but also offers commentary on the ironies of family and community life and an informative analysis of rapid mechanization and socioeconomic change. In an early example of reflexive ethnography, Bernstein illustrates how “it was in the relations between myself and my Japanese hosts—particularly in areas where our relations became most strained—that the clearest examples of cultural difference resided” (pp. xv–xvi).
From the start of fieldwork, Bernstein circumvented many obstacles that had plagued Hamabata (pp. xi-xvii, 3–40). An already experienced researcher, she chose to conduct ethnography from a localized base. Sponsorship by a particular household also gave her a kind of community-wide access that was impossible in Hamabata’s case. With constant involvement in the lives of her informants, it was naturally easier to get behind the facade in observing daily life, and, while Hamabata’s maleness had been a barrier, Bernstein’s youthful female status permitted incorporation into the host-family in a daughter-like role.

Yet despite such advantages, Bernstein still experienced considerable tension and difficulty in collecting data. That her path might be rocky became apparent early on as she struggled to adjust to the domestic environment of her hosts, the Utsunomiyas. Though welcomed and provided with an excellent window on family life, Bernstein’s assimilation to the household was stressful. One problem was that Haruko, the wife and mother, seemed disinclined to recognize the researcher’s privacy (pp. 13–24). She closely supervised most aspects of Bernstein’s life, choosing her clothing, reading her mail, setting her daily schedule, and planning her contacts with community members. She also entered the author’s room without warning and once moved her to a new one without notice. As Bernstein describes the episode:

In my absence, all my neatly arranged papers, including bills, university correspondence, and the telephone numbers and addresses of Japanese acquaintances, had been thrown “temporarily” into a carton and the carton shoved into the crammed closet [to be inaccessible for a month]. The systems I had devised for ordering my personal and professional life were smashed. (p. 15)

From such encounters, Bernstein came to feel that “Haruko was constitutionally incapable of observing any boundaries between herself and me” (p. 14). Conflicts regarding intimacy and interdependence in everyday interactions threatened to overwhelm Bernstein in a situation that was rapidly becoming too close for comfort (pp. 13–16).

As she began to seek data on additional farm wives and the community at large, Bernstein experienced another set of problems (pp. 25–40). Like Hamabata, her impulse was to employ a direct yet informal approach. Rather than working through the Utsunomiya family’s sponsorship, she initially relied upon participant observation in miscellaneous contacts, trying to become “the proverbial fly on the wall” (p. 31). Fearing that knowledge of her position and purpose might inhibit informants, Bernstein avoided self-disclosures. In retrospect, she seems to have adopted a predominantly American style of social relations according to which one may approach even strangers freely, given chance encounters or sudden convergence on topics of mutual interest (Barnlund, 1989, pp. 60–70). However, in practice, this mode of interaction often produced the opposite of its intended effect (pp. 25–27). Since potential informants were accustomed to relating to others whose ranks, roles, and group affiliations were clearly established, or even publicly “certified”, they were uneasy when such knowledge was missing and repeatedly sought to slot Bernstein into officially acceptable roles, such as that of the esteemed foreign professor addressing a high school assembly or the honored dignitary at a local festival or
meeting of the Women’s Guild. Bernstein, though, yearned to mingle freely with the community (pp. 25–28, 136). In her view, being seated with male leaders during public activities instead of with ordinary farm women inhibited both her relationships and the kinds of information that she could obtain. Finally, Bernstein found it trying to be called upon to help maintain the prestige of the Utsunomiya household through giving guest lectures at local schools, providing assistance to English teachers, and being available whenever community leaders decided to visit (pp. 29–40, 111–112). Although to informants these were important ways of linking the researcher into the local system of obligations and exchanges, she tended to regard them more individualistically as unproductive impositions on her time.

Faced with such an array of human relations problems, Bernstein only gradually and painstakingly implemented her research by shifting to an eclectic approach that combined indigenous communication techniques with other practical measures (pp. xvi, 25–31, 71–156, 171–190). Although—especially within the Utsunomiya household—opportunist participant observation and interviewing remained key aspects of her work, she ceased to resist using formal meetings and events to collect information and no longer regarded such data as artificial or misleading. In fact, her descriptions of community life in such contexts eventually came to play a central role in Haruko’s World. In addition, she learned to view sponsorship within the formal structure of the community as a vital resource, as when it prompted residents to open their gatherings to her inspection or when a school principal arranged for students’ mothers to complete questionnaires (pp. 26–29). Bernstein further accommodated to her informants’ need for formal and impersonal communication by relying more upon written data, including not just questionnaires but also various public records and an autobiography by the main informant Haruko that she incorporated into her text (pp. xvi, 24, 43–58, 80–85).

It is evident that Bernstein underwent a pronounced psychological adjustment during fieldwork (pp. 33–40). Though initially unsettled by her loss of privacy and autonomy, the Utsunomiya family’s support soon caused her to bond with it and to acquiesce to most requirements, as seen in the following passage:

In such situations, I began to feel almost as a Japanese child might have felt in resisting its parents’ wishes. For I owed a great deal to Haruko and Shoo-ichi, and whenever I gave way to my westerner’s compulsion to assert my rights, I was beset by feelings of childishness and guilt, but, above all, of obligation. [...] In the kindnesses bestowed on me by the family and by others in the community, I sensed the force of social pressures bending and shaping me to Japanese society. (p. 36)

In such a fashion, Bernstein came not just to comprehend the household and community but to identify with them, and even though the multifaceted demands continued, she used her status as a representative of the Utsunomiya household to work effectively within the formally structured local group.

This is not to suggest that Bernstein ever became wholly assimilated to Japanese modes of social relations and communication styles, since many frankly reflective passages indicate that she maintained to the end a complex and ambivalent
relationship with her hosts (pp. 30–40, 57–58, 95–97, 111–112, 150–156, 168–174, 215–224). For example, as illustrated in the following discussion of husband-wife relations, she continued to muse upon conflicts inherent to household and gender roles, producing in the process ever-deeper insights into Japanese/American cultural differences:

The moment had come for me to drop my air of detached objectivity. Aloofness seemed a mean conceit with people I cared for and might never see again. Yet, I hardly felt equipped to play marriage counselor in Japan, and like Shoo-ichi [the host-family husband] and Haruko, I was exhausted from the day’s activities. [...] Out of some sense of professional discipline, which now seemed misplaced, I had always backed away from their sincere interest in hearing what I as an educated outsider, with a different perspective, thought about their lives. Now I felt I had been wrong to disappoint them.

"Part of the problem," I ventured "is the nature of social life in Japan. As long as men and women are segregated socially, and social life is mixed in with business and political dealings, it is difficult to change some of your husband’s habits. A man is expected to attend these parties, drink, and come home late. But Japanese mothers are also to blame for spoiling their sons. Your son grunts 'More rice' and you leap up to serve him. Or he merely bumps his empty rice bowl against your sleeve and you comply. In America, children are taught to say, 'May I please have some more.'"

"He’s probably imitating me," Shoo-ichi said, penitently.

"I’m jumping up and down during the entire meal," Haruko said, complaining for the first time about her kitchen routine. (pp. 173–174)

At this point, a brief comparison of the two ethnographic encounters thus far considered may help to illuminate more fully some obstacles to cultural crossing, including the fact that Japanese and Americans rely upon fundamentally distinct ways of determining the behavior appropriate to different social contexts. The contrast is most evident in the field workers’ responses to interactions in public settings, where both Bernstein and Hamabata reacted strongly against what they perceived as a restrictive Japanese mode of managing social relationships. This included: (1) generally formal and reserved conduct, (2) restraints upon individuals freely initiating new relationships, and (3) a sharp distinction between the kinds of behavior seen as appropriate to public versus private (i.e., soto versus uchi) settings. By their own accounts, both field workers would have preferred a system of more open, informal, and spontaneous communication within a broad range of social situations. Both also doubted the validity of information obtained through formal or certified channels. They therefore tried to cut through the compartmentalized Japanese system with an American-style direct approach and turned to the use of indigenous principles of social relations only after this had failed.

In addition to such difficulties in the public sphere, Bernstein and Hamabata were also troubled by their informants’ expectations about behavior in private settings. As Bernstein’s account of immersing herself in the in-group reveals, claustrophobic uchi-type relations can have a powerful effect upon an American. At the same time
that she resisted formal behavior in out-group settings, Bernstein fervently wished for more formally defined boundaries in the context of the in-group, and, initially at least, found the lack of privacy that she encountered in the Utsunomiya household almost overwhelming. Bernstein’s case thus illustrates how extreme informality and a lack of boundaries can seriously unsettle a presumably “open” and “informal” American researcher. For his part, Hamabata was long afterwards haunted by having been compelled to embrace an inauthentically juvenile identity to be accepted in fieldwork, and he continued to lament his inability to maintain autonomous boundaries in the warm and free uchi situation. The cases of both researchers thus illustrate how an individualistic orientation may require insistence upon strong boundaries in some contexts just as much as it necessitates freedom from them in others, thereby underscoring the complex role of the “inclusion-differentiation dialectic” in identity management and negotiation (Ting-Toomey, 1993, pp. 84–86).

Although both researchers experienced problems with the intrusiveness of fellow in-group members, this of course did not mean that they were wholly opposed to informality within the uchi. Both also found the warmth of uchi relations appealing, and they certainly did not wish for anything like the soto realm’s formal codes of politeness in this setting. Still, they bridled at relinquishing individual control to meet the requirements of the intimate group in the manner that Japanese are routinely expected to do. Their public and private behavior thus underscores how, for two individualistically oriented American researchers, “the right to think, feel, and act based on the autonomous-self level [was] critical” (Ting-Toomey, 1993, p. 79).

Overall, what our two researchers’ varied reactions to public and private behavior make abundantly clear is that we are not merely dealing with a straightforward dichotomy between the “formal” Japanese versus the “informal” Americans, nor yet the “open” and “flexible” Americans versus the “highly differentiating”, “boundary conscious”, and “in-group-oriented” Japanese. Rather, we are confronted by unexpectedly intricate systems of social classification that overlap in some respects while differing in others. One important convergence is that in both systems a “public versus private” distinction influences significantly the evaluation of behavior. Although the Americans did not frame their social universe in a manner exactly like that of the explicit Japanese uchi/soto framework with all its nuances, they nonetheless categorized behavior as either too restrictive or not bounded enough, based upon the public or private context in which it occurred. They favored being unrestrained in out-group settings and, conversely, preventing transgressions of their personal boundaries within the in-group.

Thus, while the members of both cultures clearly used in-group/out-group distinctions to determine the appropriateness of close human bonding versus formality and restraint, they tended to assign such behaviors to quite different occasions. This naturally set them at cross-purposes in some contexts. As Bernstein’s

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4 For additional discussion of the kind of intimate and fused Japanese behavior that may disturb foreigners, see Hamabata (1990, pp. 50–51); Kondo (1990, pp. 151–153); and Lebra (1976, pp. 112–120).
analysis of her experience so neatly illustrates, Japanese and Americans are not always looking for different things but rather sometimes seeking the same ones in just the opposite places.

3. *Geisha*: blending into the flower and willow world

Can Japanese/American intercultural relations ever be painless or easy in situations that, like ethnography, involve the parties’ ongoing involvement in each others’ lives? Given the magnitude of cultural differences, this appears an impossible dream. Yet, occasional researchers do seem to connect with informants almost effortlessly and experience little frustration in their work. Liza Dalby’s (1983) study *Geisha* (fieldwork of 14 months in 1975–76) provides one example of such an apparently frictionless ethnographic encounter. This rich account seamlessly combines objectivist and actor-oriented description. Dalby provides both an outline of the history of the *geisha* institution (pp. 49–95, 177–182, 194–198, 220–224, 269–274) and a wealth of ethnographic data (pp. 3–47, 97–175, 182–194, 198–220, 224–266, 274–279). Not only does she explore the social organization and economic underpinnings of the teahouses in which *geisha* live and work, but she also illuminates the roles of the *geisha* themselves, teahouse “mothers”, *geisha* apprentices, male relatives, and miscellaneous staff. Dalby obtained information by establishing quasi-kinship relations at a teahouse where she was invited to live in the Pontocho quarter of Kyoto and by working as an apprentice *geisha* there and elsewhere in the district (pp. 99–117). She also carried out limited inquiries among *geisha* in Tokyo and at the Atami Hot Springs resort (pp. 165–247). Using both interview and experiential data, she portrayed the training of new *geisha* and their interactions with clients in a highly personalized way, exploring the combination of opportunity and constraint faced by *geisha*. In a painstaking assessment, she demonstrated how the self-perceptions of these strong and independent female artists contrasted markedly with typical American stereotypes of them as childish and insincere icons of a male-dominated culture (pp. xiii–xiv, 7–8, 20, 136–137, 155–160, 169–175, 201–205, 216–226).

If Liza Dalby’s encounter was not only productive of data but also unusually stress-free, how can we account for her unprecedentedly soft landing? Even a cursory review of the text suggests that an array of factors must have combined to make the difference. First, there is the historical context of the *geisha* role. As Dalby documents, even though the *geisha* world is a semi-private niche whose occupants survive by offering exclusive services, it has, in terms of recruitment at least, long been a relatively open sector of Japanese society (pp. 49–81, 177–185, 194–198, 219–225). Of course, the number of entrants has varied considerably with economic and social conditions. Yet from the late 19th century when poverty stricken families pawned their daughters into service down to the present day when only a handful of young women enter entirely of their own volition, *geisha* society has generally been more open than restrictive of access (pp. 180–182, 194–196, 218–219, 220–225). In addition, a system of quasi-kinship institutions has always stood ready to initiate
and socialize candidates (pp. 4-7, 36-44, 99-104, 182-183, 194-196, 220-225). Dalby’s geisha world thus contrasts not just with Hamabata’s universe of elite family businesses and Bernstein’s farming community but with most other sectors of Japanese society in being a domain that historically has specialized in assimilating a diverse array of unrelated persons. When an intensified interest in recruitment owing to a decline in the number of geisha at the time of fieldwork is added to the picture (pp. 5, 45, 218, 262), it becomes evident that Dalby had entered one of the potentially most hospitable milieu for which an ethnographer of Japan might have hoped. In addition, it seems likely that the American herself represented an asset to her entertainment-world hosts because of her appeal as an attractive foreigner who could help them in accommodating western guests (p. 103).

Another factor that may help to explain the lack of discord in Dalby’s work is the culturally congruent manner in which she used social ties to advance her research objectives (pp. 39-44, 98-108, 139-154, 183-187, 229-230). To be sure, most field workers, Hamabata and Bernstein included, rely upon recommendations and local sponsors. Yet, if we examine the ways in which all of these researchers utilized their social network resources, important contrasts are evident. Dalby in particular, stands out for the enthusiasm with which she used contacts not just to gain initial access to informants but to link with uchi-type groups with which she then fully identified. This process began when, after an inconclusive start with Tokyo geisha, she was invited to live in a daughter-like role at a Kyoto teahouse by the “mother” of that place (pp. 4-5, 102-104, 167-168, 180). She also undertook training under the auspices of a second teahouse and was provided with an “elder sister” to assist her in learning geisha ways.

Overall, it is striking how quickly and fully Dalby was absorbed within the two uchi-type groups that became her base. She did not struggle to achieve spontaneous and unmediated relations with informants like Hamabata nor chafe at involvement even after being immersed in the uchi in the manner of Bernstein. Instead, Dalby seems to have operated in a more typically Japanese way by embracing particularistic social relations—her own connections to specific uchi groups—as the means of establishing her place (pp. 4-5, 99-104). With this foundation, she found it natural to expand relations with informants in same manner an ordinary geisha would cultivate ties with colleagues and clients (pp. 139-150, 183-184, 229-230). Unlike Hamabata and Bernstein, Dalby thus seems to have had the full force of the indigenous social system working to her advantage almost from the outset. Rather than maintaining a hybrid and partly nontraditional role like the other two ethnographers, she readily accepted her assimilation to an established social niche and thereafter always relied upon relations with her particular patrons to obtain data. In this context, the many mechanisms that typically operate to provide geisha with support worked to enhance her effectiveness as a researcher.

Another factor that helped Dalby to connect with informants was a particular approach to learning that she adopted. Although in practice she relied upon various methods (e.g., a questionnaire circulated to geisha in several places, interviews of local officials, and brief life histories, etc.) (pp. xv, 167-170, 180, 194-198, 201-206,
214–216, 260–266), a dominant component of Dalby’s methodology was the traditional Japanese educational strategy of minarai or “learning through seeing” (pp. 44–46, 107–108, 182–183, 215–216, 223). In this approach, the trainee gradually absorbs knowledge and achieves behavioral competence by closely watching and imitating. Typically, the emphasis is upon modeling oneself on a master through long repetitive practice, with explicit verbal instructions kept to a minimum. The minarai learning stance also includes unquestioning obedience and self-discipline on the part of the student, attitudes that underscore her dependence on the teacher as well as her commitment to the activity and group conducting it. Though it is particularly emphasized in the formal instruction of traditional arts, minarai is broadly reflective of a fundamental Japanese philosophy and style of education. It therefore looms large in the training of geisha who must absorb everything from techniques of dressing, conversing, and entertaining customers to the performance of traditional instrumental music, song, and dance.

Given all of this, it is not surprising that Dalby would turn to minarai as a principal method. By accepting the role of apprentice geisha, she had clearly embraced the traditional learning stance in a general way and simultaneously signaled her acquiescence to group authority. Her reliance on minarai is seen in this description of an early moment in her geisha career:

Ichiume [Dalby’s “elder sister”] entered. She stopped in the center of the lower part of the room and bowed with her hands on the floor, then picked up the sake bottle, and, bearing it like a vial of holy water, went to sit at the side of a guest. The proprietress of the Dai-Ichi [the sponsoring teahouse] gave me a small shove as Ichiume was getting up from her bow, so with one eye on where she went, the other on where I was going, I followed her in. The guests, who had been forewarned, all looked at me and then at each other, then at the proprietress. I bowed and said, “Minarai, dosu e. Yoroshuu otanomooshimasu” in Kyoto dialect. “I’m a novice (literally, learning by observation), begging your favor please.” They smiled, scratching their heads.

Ichiume poured sake for the man next to her, so I did the same for the guest on my right. They downed their small cups in one gulp and offered them to us. “My” customer asked the mistress of the Dai-Ichi, “Does she drink sake?” uncertain as to how to address me. “Of course.” I answered him directly, holding out the small cup to be filled, “Did you ever hear of a geisha who didn’t drink sake?”

A teetotaling geisha is a contradiction in terms. I had passed my second test in the eyes of the other geisha. I was beginning to be accepted in a legitimate role of geisha society: the watcher and learner. Once I had demonstrated that I could observe and mimic the behavior of my older sisters, then the customers, the mothers, and the other geisha began to treat me as Ichigiku [Dalby’s professional geisha name]. (pp. 107–108)

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5The resemblance between minarai and the traditional anthropological conception of participant observation notwithstanding, we should note that Dalby (p. xv) expresses dissatisfaction with the latter notion, since she feels that it creates a false sense of the objectivity of ethnographic studies.
As the passage suggests, Dalby relied upon meaning-laden acts—from the pouring of sake, to traditional singing, and playing of the three-stringed shamisen—to convey her knowledge and dedication to informants. She merged ethnography and traditional learning, thereby conducting research in a manner highly congruent with the cultural milieu. By contrast, even though Hamabata and Bernstein were drawn into the worlds of their informants, they never experienced such complete blurring of their researcher and community-assigned roles. Nor was their behavior submitted to an almost ritualized series of tests.

A final way of accounting for Dalby’s seemingly frictionless engagement with informants is to examine more closely the personal chemistry reflected in her encounter. While this admittedly moves us into a subjective area, it is clearly not one to overlook, inasmuch as many passages in Geisha are quite revealing of the author’s emotional and value stance vis-a-vis the fieldwork culture. In this context, it makes sense to take advantage of the available data while exercising care to avoid unfounded speculation.

One thing that is apparent is how sharply Dalby differed from the other researchers in her emotional connection with the research community. Although both Hamabata and Bernstein displayed profound respect for the alien roles and values that they encountered, they were also very ambivalent regarding some core aspects of the host culture. Dalby, by contrast, seems to have crossed the line into enthusiastic identification with the other. This is evident not only from her becoming a geisha and her admiration for geisha arts (pp. 254–256, 275–278, 299–300) but also from statements throughout the text: “I soon found that I had plunged my whole heart into the endeavor... I was totally absorbed in learning to be a geisha” (p. xv). “Thus it seemed quite natural when I began calling the proprietress okaasan, ‘mother,’ just as the other geisha did” (p. 99). “The longer I lived in Pontochoo, the more fascinated I had become with the geisha life. I found myself attracted to both the glamour and the discipline, so I had to hide the excitement I felt at her suggestion [that Dalby try becoming a geisha]” (pp. 102–103). “I was exhilarated. Praise from Momizuru, the warm sake, a fancy envelope with a tip from the mother of the Dai-Ichi—all had gone to my head” (p. 114). “I know from my own experience, too, that it is difficult to be satisfied with a bare minimum number of kimono. Once wearing kimono becomes a habit, the desire to have a chestful of kimono and obi becomes an addiction” (p. 293). As the quotations suggest, in addition to the structural and contextual factors analyzed earlier, personal proclivities and a serendipitous convergence of interests greatly encouraged Dalby’s bonding with the host community. Here was someone who approached her ethnographic encounter not just as a dedicated researcher but as a young woman absorbed in the excitement and glamour of the role that she sought to understand.

It may also be that Dalby had an unusual ability and/or need to suspend her own values and sense of self for the sake of entering culturally alien space. Her previously having spent several months training in a Zen temple (p. 304) does suggest strong motivation to endure privation for such purposes. But whatever the case, the comparison of Dalby’s experience with those of Hamabata and Bernstein underscores how much idiosyncratic and personal factors can impact communication
within fieldwork and how greatly even skilled and sensitive researchers may vary in these terms. The basic chemistry of individual human relations should never be overlooked amidst the search for key structural variables.

Overall, Liza Dalby’s encounter is important because it demonstrates that American ethnographers and Japanese informants will sometimes gravitate towards surprisingly harmonious and mutually gratifying patterns of social relationship. It further indicates that Japanese can be extremely open to outsiders. Yet it also suggests that these things are most likely to occur within subcultures such as the flower and willow world that have historically had rather permeable boundaries and with solitary foreign researchers who are emotionally disposed to assimilate to the host culture.

4. Crafting Selves: class, gender, identity, and intercultural relations

Having pondered the difficulties of Hamabata and Bernstein and then witnessed Liza Dalby’s much smoother course, one might be tempted to conclude that there exists a preferred path for American ethnographers wishing to establish effective communication with Japanese informants. This would involve first identifying an appropriate uchi-type group to provide a home base, then gaining access as a quasi-member, adopting a specific traditional role, submitting fully to the demands of group membership, learning through minarai, and, finally, expanding the inquiry by working through uchi-based network connections. It also seems that youthful female ethnographers who can blend more easily into dependent and subordinate roles would encounter the fewest obstacles in implementing such a strategy. While our final case does not wholly invalidate this line of thinking, it does indicate a need for refinement. Dorinne Kondo was a youthful female ethnographer who clearly succeeded in communicating with informants by participating in various uchi-type groups. Yet her path was also more complex and stressful than Liza Dalby’s. Let me first summarize Kondo’s accomplishments and then consider her methods.

Kondo’s 1990 work Crafting Selves is an ethnography of small businesses in the Shitamachi (“Downtown”) district of Tokyo (pp. 3–7, 49–75) that focuses on the identities of some 30 men and women working in a bakery/confectionary (pp. 4, 8–11). Kondo vividly portrays what had up to then (1978–81) been a murky and uncelebrated part of the Japanese economic landscape (pp. 49–51). In constructing her representation of this lively social world, Kondo also moves beyond a traditional objectivist ethnographic stance by juxtaposing vignettes of interactions among workers and reflexive analyses of her own relations with informants with more conventional descriptions of the cultural and historical contexts of business, family, and gender organization (7–9, 38–48, 263–264, 302–304). She further employs postmodernist-influenced experimental writing strategies to problematize the terms with which Japanese business and work life are typically portrayed. Even basic concepts such as “company” (kaisha) and “family” (uchi) are shown to have shifting and ambiguous meanings, as actors differently positioned in terms of age, class, and gender deploy them in incessant struggles to assert preferred definitions of
themselves and their situations (pp. 141, 153, 159–162, 175–178, 182, 198–224). The parties also display a more open-ended and relation-dependent sense of personal identity than is common in the west (pp. 14–43).

Another important theme of Crafting Selves is the inevitable and ambiguous intertwining of domination and resistance in the informants’ lives. Thus, when male bakers asserts their superiority to part-time female workers by emphasizing the uniqueness of their artisanal skills and engaging in frenzies of overtime work, they also exploit themselves and sacrifice any possible claims to the more culturally honored middle-class status of “salaryman” (pp. 214–218, 229–241, 247–257). Conversely, even though domestically oriented female employees limit their prestige and influence within the company by rejecting full-time status, they simultaneously achieve greater personal autonomy and also manage to create a powerful role for themselves as maternal figures, emotionally central to their mixed-sex work groups (pp. 45–46, 258–259, 285–299). Even the company president is shown to undermine his own otherwise substantial authority. While seeking to expand his influence and gain legitimacy by providing benefits and stressing the “family-like” nature of his firm, he inadvertently supplies workers with a powerful idiom with which to criticize his more self-serving demands as inauthentically “familial” (pp. 175–191, 199–225). Thus, at the same time that Kondo treats power as an inevitable aspect of social relations, she represents even insecure lower-class workers’ lives as more than simple stories of dominance and submission.

By what process did Kondo achieve such a subtly nuanced understanding of her informants’ world and what hurdles did she face? As in the previous cases, this ethnographer operated largely through participation in uchi-type groups, beginning with a several-month stay in a household in the working class district of Arakawa Ward (pp. ix, 12, 68–71). This interim residence had been arranged by Kondo’s legal guarantor, an elderly instructor of flower arrangement. As it turned out, the home-stay provided an intense learning environment, with Kondo being assimilated into something like the ojooshan (“young lady”) role that is common for upper-middle-class women (pp. 12–17). Yet, she reacted strongly against many restrictions imposed by her anxiously protective sponsoring family, including their nightly curfew, and she felt demeaned when pressed into fulfilling stereotypical gender roles. As a fictive daughter for instance, she had to join in anticipating the needs of the male household head, such as an automatically refilled bowl of rice. She also felt strong pressure to live up to her Japanese appearance and daughterly role. In general, Kondo found herself powerfully reinforced for appropriate behavior and persistently questioned about deviations from the approved script. Ultimately, she rebelled. She decided to leave the household when, after suddenly encountering her own Japanese-housewife-like image in a mirror in an arresting moment of “epiphany”, she feared the loss of her strongly autonomous American identity (pp. 16–18). Following this near collapse of personhood, Kondo made a short visit to the United States and then moved to a Shitamachi apartment of her own. Though this provided some relief, she still experienced stress from incessant monitoring by neighbors, unrelenting expectations of reciprocity, unexpected appearances of salesmen in her apartment entryway, and even the helpful gestures of acquaintances who came without warning
to cook and clean when she fell ill (pp. 18–22, 63–64, 242). The pressures culminated in another transformative moment in which a friend urged Kondo to provide English lessons for a local teacher who had previously been of help to her and justified this suggestion by saying, “[T]he Japanese don’t treat themselves as important, do they?” (p. 22). As Kondo explains:

Not only did it [the friend’s statement] perfectly capture my own feelings of being bound by social obligation, living my life for others, it also indicated to me a profoundly different way of thinking about the relationship between selves and social world. Persons seemed to be constituted in and through social relations and obligations to others. Selves and society did not seem to be separate entities; rather, the boundaries were blurred. (p. 22)

Such experiences made Kondo realize that issues of identity formation lay at the heart of the working class world she wished to comprehend and that it was imperative to explore how workers sought power and meaning by collaborating and competing in “crafting” definitions of themselves (pp. 22–23, 43–47). She was thus obliged by the pressures of a relation-focused social universe to shift her inquiry to just those issues that were for her the most emotionally and culturally unsettling.

Following these initial upheavals, Kondo gathered data by working part-time for a year at the bakery and for another two months in a local hairdresser’s shop (p. 4). She also joined in excursions for bakery employees (pp. 182–191), an ethics training retreat (pp. 76–115), and public relations activities of her firm (pp. 191–194, 217–218). These involvements gave Kondo ample opportunities to witness both the workers’ stresses and how they resisted company control. Finally, she extended her understanding of working-class life by interviewing, as opportunities arose, various Shitamachi informants, including neighbors, small-business and shop owners, government and business-association officials, teachers, students, and the members of her tea ceremony group (pp. ix, 7, 17–24, 119–121, 128–138, 151–155, 194–196, 217).

Amidst all this work, Kondo was often caught in conflicting loyalties. While grateful for the bakery president’s hospitality, she was also repelled by his authoritarian treatment of workers (pp. 77, 199–215). She was likewise torn between her fascination with the intriguing stories of the male artisans (pp. 229–233) and her identification with the part-time female workers (pp. 258–264, 287–299). Finally, despite being drawn into group processes and invigorated by new inner strengths during the company ethics retreat, Kondo lamented the concurrent erosion of her autonomous self. Through it all she struggled with her sense of position in a world about which she felt very ambivalent, one in which growth, success, and strength always seemed linked to diminished individual control of events and relationships (pp. 80–81, 111–115). As the following passage shows, her departing the field was precipitated by an episode relating to this theme:

I continued to stay on as research became more and more productive, until one event convinced me that the time to depart was near. At a tea ceremony class, I performed a basic “thin tea” ceremony flawlessly, without need for prompting or
correction of my movements. My teacher said in tones of approval, “You know, when you first started, I was so worried. The way you moved, the way you walked, was so clumsy! But now, you’re just like an *ojoosan*, a nice young lady.” Part of me was inordinately pleased that my awkward, exaggerated Western movements had finally been replaced by the disciplined grace that makes the tea ceremony so seemingly natural and beautiful to watch. But another voice cried out in considerable alarm, “Let me escape before I’m completely transformed!” And not too many weeks later, leave I did. (pp. 23–24)

Considering Kondo’s fieldwork overall, one could argue that, like the other researchers, she succeeded mainly by working through *uchï*-type groups with which she had affiliations. Her situation also resembled Dalby’s in that they both entered environments hungry for youthful female labor. As for difficulties, of all four of the ethnographers, Kondo clearly experienced the most pervasive and persistent tensions in assimilating to the fieldwork society, and she found gender-linked subordination and limitations on her personal freedom most unsettling. Since the reasons for these reactions were doubtless deep and complex, we can only introduce the main possibilities here. One likely cause of friction was that Kondo seems to have shared with Hamabata and Bernstein (but not Dalby) an archetypal American anxiety that the demands of other primary group members would swamp her autonomous individuality. As numerous intercultural researchers have previously documented (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Smith & Bond, 1998, pp. 62–64; Ting-Toomey, 1993, pp. 78–81), such concern for autonomy and the independent construal of self is one of the most important dimensions that distinguishes the members of individualist and collectivist cultures. Such a disposition would have made it difficult to operate within the close confines of any *uchï*-type group. Another possible source of Kondo’s sometimes tense relations with informants may have been her commitment to a politically based interpretation that portrays the informants’ identities and actions as primarily grounded in power relations. To be sure hers is not a simplistic form of political analysis, since, as we have shown, Kondo takes pains to untangle the ironies and contradictions of power. She also incorporates non-political factors—e.g., “love”, “fulfillment”, and “satisfaction” (p. 115); “pride” and “happiness” (p. 160); “solidary worker communities” and “satisfying worker identities” (p. 256); and “participatory belonging” and “self-fulfillment” (p. 305)—into her interpretations. But in practice such benign forces are quickly subsumed within the framework of power relations, as illustrated in this passage:

The Satoos [the bakery owners], finally, embody the cultural ideal of disciplined subjects finding fulfillment in that discipline. Life in households and family firms draws on this discourse of participatory belonging and self-fulfillment. But seeing in “the Japanese” a utopian model of human connectedness and belonging fails to see that for my neighbors—or, I would argue, for anyone else in any other setting—this belonging and connectedness is never beyond power. In this light, any idealization of family or communitarian sentiments in family firms seems highly suspect. (p. 305; see also pp. 114, 224–225, 256, 308)
A problem with this stance is that it ironically restricts our view of the potential field of social relations by transforming power itself into a foundational category: all acts are ultimately political and apparently disinterested behavior just a mirage. Yet, a possible skewing of perception and motivation is apparent if we reverse the terms of Kondo's equation. Would it not make just as much sense to interpret some displays of power by saying that the actors are grasping at love or solidarity in a blindly misguided way as to assume, with Kondo, that expressions of cohesion and caring are always fundamentally political? (Couldn't power be seen as "sometimes not beyond love" in the same sense that love is "never beyond power"). However, despite empirical and theoretical support for such a position, it is not considered by Kondo. As a result, her representation of the Shitamachi world occasionally seems pressed into a political mold to fit the researcher's ideology. This is likely to have increased tensions between ethnographer and informants in addition to introducing dissonance within Kondo herself. Such tendencies, together with her concern for exposing class and gender inequities through her analyses, may in part explain her rocky path in fieldwork. Finally, we may wonder if Kondo's background as a third-generation Japanese-American did not make dealing with the rigid gender and class systems of the host family and bakery more trying. As she reports, growing up Asian-American had reinforced her awareness of discrimination and unquestioned hierarchies (pp. 300–303). It may also be that Kondo's socialization as a Japanese-American female made the prospect of becoming a Japanese-style ojoosan ("young lady") particularly unnerving (Kondo, 1990, pp. 300–301; Hamabata, 1990, pp. 1–2; Nakao, 1978, pp. 464–469; Yanagisako, 1985, pp. 95–130). This would at least help to explain the emphasis on resistance to being reshaped as an ojoosan in her reflexive account.

Whatever the exact mix of reasons for Kondo's problems in connecting with her hosts, it is clear that she reacted by adopting a complex and ambivalent pose. Though immersing herself in several uchi-type groups, she fully committed herself to none and occasionally moved from one to another when her autonomy was jeopardized or her ability to judge independently threatened to crumble. She also avoided total absorption in the uchi by orienting herself partly toward extensive research and engaging more superficially with a variety of groups. The difficulty of her balancing act is captured in this passage:

My experiences of identification, fragmentation, and self-transformation eloquently demonstrated for me the simultaneously creative and distressing effects of the interplay of meaning and power as my friends, co-workers, and I rewrote our identities. Yet I would argue that enthusiastic participation in my friends' lives was essential before I could step back to discern the meaningful order in everyday life and thereby understand its significance. Engagement and openness could throw

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6 In the ethnography of Japan there are many examples where love, commitment, and solidarity seem to outweigh or be on a par with the power urge. See, for example, Lebra's (1984) treatment of Japanese women and Rohlen's (1974, pp. 117–120, 125, 133–134) discussions of senpai-kohai and the bases of authority in a Japanese firm. For a theory of motivation from cognitive anthropology that treats both power and love as more autonomous forces see D'Andrade (1995, pp. 229–243, 250–251). Also see Ortner (1984, pp. 151, 157) on the overemphasis on power in Bourdieu's practice theory.
into relief wrenching contradictions, but it was also productive of meaning, of identity, of change. Through participation, one had to open oneself to others and remain willing to change one's perceptions through this intimate contact. Only then could difference be truly realized. And only then could the issue of identity and crafting selves emerge as my central theoretical problem. (p. 24)

Engaging deeply in intercultural communication thus clearly came at a great emotional cost to Kondo. Does this merely reflect the fact that her ideological commitments, her Japanese-American heritage, or some other factor rendered her less open to Japanese culture than she might have been? While such questions may be raised, they also overlook a key element in Kondo's summary of her own experience. As the preceding quotation shows, it was precisely her strained and ambiguous involvement that enabled her to comprehend the tensions inherent in her informants' world and the relational and contested nature of personhood. If she wished to learn about the mechanisms limiting individual autonomy, Kondo needed to subject herself to those forces and yet somehow remain detached. Likewise, in order to explore the ambiguities of power in the gender and class relations of Shitamachi residents, she had to experience these first-hand, while simultaneously maintaining critical distance on her subject. Kondo's research problem and host community thus required an approach to intercultural communication dramatically different from those of the other three ethnographers who all had the luxury of focusing on less contested terrain within the Japanese social landscape.

5. Discussion and conclusions

For those seeking to generalize about the problems that frequently beset Japanese/American relations, a qualitative comparison of ethnographic encounters such as performed here has at least three advantages. First, it helps us to gauge the true severity of the challenges that Americans face when engaging substantively with Japanese. Since our four ethnographers were by any standard (e.g., prior training, time on task, motivation to understand, etc.) exceptionally well primed for success, their difficulties should clearly give pause to others. If researchers such as these must struggle so, how much worse are the prospects for the average businessman, trade negotiator, or educational consultant? A second value of this qualitative comparison builds upon the first. If our ethnographers were indeed better prepared and more committed, then the problems that remained despite their best efforts most likely represent some of the most intractable culturally based conflicts. In this sense the ethnographic encounters constitute something like a litmus test for the points that divide Americans and Japanese fundamentally, and issues surfacing in more than one case take on added significance. The third benefit of a qualitative comparison is that the use of detailed case material helps us avoid slipping over into oversimplification of the complex and variable reality of Japanese/American intercultural relations on-the-ground.

This last factor is especially important in view of the diversity of the cases. There is of course the striking contrast—to which we will return—between the non-stressful
experience of Dalby and those of the other three ethnographers who struggled in so many ways. In addition, many person and situation-specific factors appear to have made particular encounters more or less difficult (cf., Smith & Bond, 1998, pp. 267–291). These include: (1) the openness of the research environment, with Dalby’s and Kondo’s being very welcoming, Hamabata’s initially the least receptive, and Bernstein’s somewhere in between, (2) the complexity of the researcher’s role and its congruence with existing patterns, with Dalby who pursued a single well known role doing the best, while the others, who all tried to establish novel or composite identities, found less ready acceptance, (3) the nature of research objectives, with Kondo, who embraced a social criticism agenda along with ethnography, understandably encountering more stress than her colleagues who focused mainly on the latter task, and finally, (4) ethnicity, with both Hamabata and Kondo initially expecting to address deep seated racial identity issues during their research and experiencing more tension as a result. Here the rocky course of our two Japanese-American researchers raises important questions about the impact of a foreign field worker’s sharing ancestry with his or her informants. Although this may help to secure access initially, it can also impose special burdens, as the ethnographer struggles with her own and others’ expectations arising from the perception of common ties.

Turning from the diversity of the encounters to problems shared by the researchers, the latter suggest that incompatible Japanese and American frameworks for managing social relations lie at the heart of their miscommunications. If the principles underlying all the reported conflicts are teased out, something like a central fault line emerges. In the more stressful cases — those of Hamabata, Bernstein, and Kondo — the following differences seem critical: Whereas the first inclination of Japanese is often to frame situations in terms of the uchi/soto distinction and then to adjust by using associated concepts such as homme/tatemae, u/e/shiita, and ninjo/giri, Americans tend to conceptualize social relations more openly in terms of universalistic social categories and values as well as to emphasize individual autonomy in managing relationships. (The American proclivity for universalistic categorization can be seen not just in Hamabata’s and Bernstein’s initial attempts to relate freely to various informants but also in Hamabata’s focus on ethnicity as a generalized basis of identity and in Kondo’s preoccupation with abstract categories of persons, such as women and members of the working class, something that complicated her bonding with several uchi-type groups.) Given such fundamental differences, it challenges Americans to embrace operating in terms of the uchi principle or to cope with the unexpected formality and circumscription of social relations within the soto realm. It is likewise difficult for Japanese to accept either outsiders approaching them freely or distancing behaviors from their uchi mates.

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7This conclusion is reinforced by the experience of other foreign ethnographers in Japan. See, for example, Joy Hendry’s (1992) account of how her relations with an informant/friend deteriorated sharply as Hendry’s research focus shifted and drew them into a complex new assortment of roles.

8Intercultural communication researchers have previously documented a parallel process whereby foreign business managers with ancestral ties to the country of placement experience greater stress than managers with no such connections (Selmer & Shiu, 1999).
These conclusions of course echo those of previous researchers in both anthropology (Befu, 1971; Lebra, 1976; Nakane, 1970) and intercultural communication (Barnlund, 1989; Catheart & Catheart, 1997; Condon, 1984; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994) who have stressed in-group/out-group distinctions in Japan. They likewise support the findings of many interculturalists whose research has documented the profound differences in orientation toward social relationships in individualist and collectivist cultures (Hofstede 1980, 1991; Ting-Toomey, 1993, p. 78; Smith & Bond, 1998, pp. 38–69). However, the present analysis also looks beyond the basic fact that members of the two cultures employ formally distinct frameworks for orienting themselves to fields of social relations to illuminate more fully the implications of this difference. In part, it does so by underscoring—as seen in our analysis of Hamabata’s and Bernstein’s unexpectedly complex deployments of boundaries with various in-group and out-group members among their Japanese hosts—the intricacy of the inclusion-differentiation dialectic in identity negotiation processes (Ting-Toomey, 1993, pp. 84–86.) It also does so by highlighting the multifaceted, fluid, and exacting nature of the Japanese social system itself. As both our ethnographic encounters and recent theoretical discussions (Bachnik & Quinn, 1994) make clear, many factors combine to render living within a Japanese uchi/soto based system of social relations inherently challenging: (1) First, there is the expectation that actors will be adept in moving rapidly between forms of behavior seen as appropriate for uchi and soto settings. As Hamabata (1990, pp. 10–11, 46–51, 134–136) notes, skill in such switching is a key indicator of social maturity in Japan, and it was clearly something that both he and Bernstein struggled to master. (2) Another factor compounding problems for anyone adjusting to the Japanese system—one arising out of the relational and indexical nature of individual identity and the social order in Japan—is the extreme fluidity and uncertainty of uchi/soto boundaries themselves which, though regarded as crucial, are never fixed (Bachnik & Quinn, 1994). To the contrary, as both Hamabata’s analysis (1990, pp. 46–51) and Kondo’s informants’ constant recalibrations of the limits of “familial” relations within the Satoo bakery illustrate, uchi/soto boundaries are constantly in motion, shifting to fit the situational context. Moreover, since this boundary flux is encoded in the lexicon and grammar, the lines demarcating the two realms often change from one utterance to the next. This gives the Japanese uchi/soto framework of social relations a highly mercurial quality going beyond anything seen in most societies where in-group/out-group boundaries are central. As a result, the task of correctly perceiving such distinctions and organizing social life in terms of them becomes vastly more difficult. (3) Finally, we must not forget that in Japan the obligation to conform to sharply defined expectations of homne versus tatemae behavior, however transient particular standards may be, tends to become imperative. As the cases of Hamabata, Bernstein, and Kondo all illustrate, behaving appropriately for the uchi and soto contexts is often the sine qua non of group acceptance, and it frequently entails great sacrifices, such as relinquishing treasured aspects of one’s self-concept, abandoning distinct interpersonal boundaries, and forsaking commitment to universalistic values. Such subtleties of Japanese social organization must clearly
be considered if we are to do justice to the barriers that divide Japanese and Americans. In particular, a more nuanced representation of the complex and fluid ways in which in-group/out-group distinctions come into play is essential (see also Smith & Bond, 1998, pp. 64, 210, 224–226).

From a practical standpoint, we must also stress what a wide array of factors makes synchronizing with the Japanese system especially challenging for outsiders. Of course Americans too contribute to the kinds of misunderstandings that we have analyzed. It is surely both blind and ethnocentric to enter the Japanese social world expecting to freely follow one’s impulses in establishing relationships. Similarly, insisting on strict personal boundaries, relationships unblemished by utilitarian interests, and the observance of universalistic western ideals while ensconced in an interdependency-based social milieu clearly burdens one’s Japanese hosts. At the same time, however, the particularly Japanese combination of fluidity, rapidly changing frames of reference, and precise expectations does make navigation of their system especially difficult, and not only for Americans. How challenging assimilation to the finely nuanced Japanese _uchi/soto_ based social world may be is shown not just by our ethnographic encounters but also by research on persons occupying other kinds of outsider roles in Japan. These studies demonstrate that it is difficult _even for Japanese_ to become operational within their system when starting from scratch or from some point outside of it. Thus, Lois Peak’s (1991, pp. 24, 71–75, 78–80, 129–142, 165–180) study of a Japanese preschool makes it clear that learning _keijime_ (the ability to switch quickly between _honne_ and _tatemae_ behavior) is very difficult for students and therefore becomes an objective to which teachers devote much time and effort. Similarly, research on the repatriation of Japanese youth with long sojourns overseas shows that it is much easier for them to adjust to a new _western_ social environment than to re-assimilate to the demanding Japanese social universe upon their return (White, 1988, pp. 1–2, 59–72). Such studies suggest that the struggles of three out of four of our American researchers were to a considerable extent the result of fundamental structural barriers to the incorporation of outsiders in Japan.

Yet what are we to make, in this context, of Liza Dalby’s much smoother course? If Japanese frameworks of social relations are typically so fluid, intricate, and exacting as to overwhelm persons accustomed to more straightforward American ones, why was Dalby seemingly unfazed by routinely having to relate to people in Japanese terms? Moreover, why was she unthreatened by having to relinquish much of her autonomous identity, along with clear interpersonal boundaries, and commitments to universalistic values? Of course it could be that Dalby encountered more culturally based conflict than she conveys and simply downplayed it. However, the text gives little indication of this, and it certainly runs counter to her overall self-portrait as an enthusiastically engaged field worker. Although we cannot resolve the apparent contradictions without additional evidence, it is clearly important to convey how an outcome such as Dalby’s is at least comprehensible within the present explanatory framework. I therefore close with a discussion of why differences that often become sticking points in Japanese/American relations may not have done so in Dalby’s case.
It is most likely that several things combined to ease Dalby's path. Some of these have already been suggested: that she operated within a relatively open sector of Japanese society and that she was personally fascinated with the geisha role. In addition, we should note that, despite the ordinarily distinctive Japanese and American approaches to social relations, there are still some contexts in which Americans may experience relational styles resembling those of the Japanese, thereby preconditioning themselves for easy assimilation, given the right circumstances, to Japanese social life. Such an argument is supported by the research of White (1988, pp. 105–110, 118) who—subsuming this phenomenon under the notion of relationship-based social group membership—has observed that members of American adolescent cliques and sports teams frequently do display attitudes and behaviors resembling those of mainstream Japanese. For such youth, demonstrating group involvement through active participation typically outweighs individual investments in particular activities, duties, beliefs, and common values. While all of the latter frequently shift, the expectation that members will make group participation their priority remains absolute. Moreover, neither preserving a strong boundary between self and others nor cultivating a distinctive personal identity seems to have great salience in this context. One significance of this partial overlap of American and Japanese culture is that it could have provided a basis for just the sort of mutualistic involvement with informants that Dalby exhibited. If such an in-group-oriented mode of social relations is indeed part of the experience of many American youth, then falling back upon it might have seemed very natural to a young researcher like Liza Dalby who suddenly found herself within the embrace of a glamorous social world in which success and acceptance rested on her ability to adjust to rapidly shifting uchi/soto-type relations. A final reason that Dalby escaped a threat to her sense of self in switching to Japanese-style social relations may have been that for her this paradoxically became a means of realizing particularly American values, such as individual autonomy and female empowerment. Although it is easy for the westerner to dismiss geisha as just another category of subordinated Japanese women, Dalby (1983, pp. xiii–xiv, 7–8, 155–160, 171–175, 224–226) argues forcefully that at the time of her fieldwork geisha were among the most independent and secure single women in Japan. Even though their role formally centered on pleasing men, they escaped the degradation of prostitutes and bar girls by placing sexual services outside their responsibility and asserting identities as professional artists. Geisha were also able to achieve social influence and financial resources by manipulating uchi/soto distinctions as they worked with colleagues to manage clients and orchestrate frontstage/backstage relationships. Such aspects of geisha empowerment may have mitigated Dalby's concerns about compromising her autonomy and values by immersing herself in the flower and willow world.

As the foregoing discussion illustrates, even though the results of Japanese/American encounters are sometimes just the opposite of what we might expect from the two peoples' seemingly contradictory values and approaches to social relations, they may still be comprehensible, given particular features of the situational context. There are also some little noticed areas of overlap between Japanese and American culture that may on occasion provide the basis for surprisingly stress-free relations.
Does this mean that the quest to explain the difficulties of Japanese/American relations through reference to basic conflicts in cultural orientations—such as individualist autonomy versus collectivism, in-group/out-group focus, and universalism/particularism—should be abandoned? Obviously not, since we have been able to understand much about the difficulties of Hamabata, Bernstein, and Kondo by using such distinctions. Still, as both this analysis and some intercultural training exercises (Goldman, 1992) have shown, an approach that explains intergroup conflicts solely in terms of abstract cultural principles does bear considerable risks, and it is unlikely that there will ever be simple formulas for explicating Japanese/American interactions. Smith and Bond (1998), have aptly stated the case for caution in their discussion of the collectivist cultural orientation:

While much has been written about the contrast between individualist and collectivist cultures, it is not plausible that the concept of collectivism can encompass all that we need to know about the variety of Asian, African, and Latin American cultures that have been characterized as collectivist. (p. 64)

In this context, along with attempts to refine the models of individual autonomy and group attachment by reformulating identity management theory (Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Ting-Toomey, 1993), one of the more promising pathways toward an appropriately nuanced understanding may lie in case-based qualitative comparisons of the sort employed here, analyses in which objectively framed comparisons aimed at generalization rest upon the non-reified foundation of several in-depth reflexive studies of long-term encounters between members of the same two cultures. With this kind of approach, one can attend to both fundamental contrasts in modes of group affiliation and identity formation and to the manner in which the expression of such differences can vary situationally.

In the present study, employment of such a method has enabled us to isolate several important questions that could help in efforts to refine the frameworks used in more broadly based comparisons of individualist and collectivist cultures:

1. How fixed are in-group/out-group boundaries in the case of each culture? Are they relatively stable or constantly shifting as in the Japanese example?
2. How can we best characterize the overall mix of inclusiveness and differentiation that is reflected in a culture’s system of interpersonal and intergroup boundary relations? As our analysis of the experiences of Hamabata and Bernstein in particular has shown, such patterns may be more complicated than is normally assumed (cf., Ting-Toomey, 1993, pp. 84–86). And finally,
3. Are there any structural circumstances in which particular categories of persons within an individualist culture can be expected to behave in more collectivist fashion or vice versa (the Dalby exception)?

Hopefully, by incorporating questions such as these into future analyses, we may be able to construct comparisons of individualist and collectivist systems that are at once more penetrating and truer to the complexity of the underlying social reality.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my profound appreciation to Thomas P. Rohlen, T. Dunbar Moodie, Rachael Thayer-Gayanilo, Judith Maria Buechler, and Joyce Dillon for reading earlier drafts of this paper and for their insightful comments about it. Although their suggestions have helped immensely, I take sole responsibility for the final form of the arguments that are presented here.

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